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Acquisitions Archaeology — Paradigm Shift

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I find the idea of “paradigm shift” fascinating.¹ Following **Kuhn**, a paradigm is basically a model “from which spring particular coherent traditions of” — in our case — library practice.² When it changes, what was coherent before is no longer coherent; something else — new assemblage of particular traditions (practices) — is. As I investigate CD-ROMs, it is becoming clear that CD-ROMs became part of a paradigm of traditions and practices within the library, but also in the wider world of “information” and “media” (these two latter terms being taken in the widest possible sense).

I have recently confessed my initial inability to imagine beyond the CD despite being completely aware of its inherent limitations. This is because the CD was a critical piece of what I will unreflectively call my “information paradigm.” I had recently made the paradigm shift from analog media (especially cassettes) to “digital media” (i.e., CDs) in my personal life, and that was a big change. A further example of my perception of CDs will also hopefully show the role that paradigm plays in making sense of the world around us, on the one hand, and limiting our ability to find a different perspective of the world around us, on the other.

I remember that sometime in the mid 1990s I came across a (paper) catalog that advertised a 200-disc CD changer for a home audio system. I remember this clearly because it was a “light-bulb moment.” I had seen players that could play five, six, or even seven (the “6+1”) CDs, which seemed like a lot. Of course, even a five-disc changer could play more than a 120 minute mix tape, though you were limited to what came pre-recorded on the five CDs (a kind of tradeoff that I accepted as part of the paradigm shift). And I could always make a mix tape if that happened to suit the circumstances better — tapes did not disappear immediately. But what I really wanted was the ability to get a large collection of music that I liked (i.e., all of it) and randomize it in a giant playlist. A 200-disc changer would make this possible, at least within the comfort of my own home. (A 200-disc changer was not exactly “portable,” even in the mid-90s.) When one thought in terms of CDs, a 200-disc changer was the dream. Or so I thought....

Somewhere around the time of my revelation **Lisa Crismond** wrote about mixed media packages in her “Media Minder” column.³ These packages, simply defined, brought

“together material in more than one format.” (Note that even the terminology here is paradigm-bound: “material” and “format” are used in a way that might be a bit ambiguous, or even inaccurate today.) The idea with such packages was that “multimedia brings different media into one package — sound, still, and text — mixed in a variety of ways such as showing illustrations, animation, and video clips, providing word definitions, geographic identification, and background essays, and including spoken and music recordings.”

Perhaps you can already see where all of this is going...

Keep in mind that in 1993 “the latest development [was] the emergence of the multimedia workstation which adds speakers, sound cards, and CD-ROM readers,” while still way out “on the horizon is the convergence of telephone/television/cable and computer technologies to create the high resolution ‘smart’ TV’s and phones with screens that will be accessed through modems and telephone lines or cable hookups.” So it is a present future that sounds familiar, yet absurdly clunky. While this is an extremely prescient vision of the future that is not all that inaccurate, it also isn’t quite right.

In the midst of these emerging and predicted technological developments, **Crismond** brings up the topic of “new media,” including eBooks. Noting that, already in the early 90s “all books and journals at some point in the process are converted to electronic file,” there is an opening for another visionary look into the near future. While **Crismond** points out that some electronic publications are “available online only...through a data base [sic] provider or the Internet,” the focus remains on CD-ROMs and the inherent limitations in a technological regime where “a number of proprietary systems [are] playing their own media.” Despite the fact that “common CD-ROMs and floppy discs have emerged...there is no standard for portable players.”

It is clear that the CD-ROM was a prisoner of the discourse that created and inscribed it. Despite yet another example of

the ability to see beyond the CD-ROM (that is, to the already-present and promising Internet), the CD dominates the conversation. Incompatible formats and proprietary devices are not problems that require moving beyond the CD-

ROM; curiously, they are so many solutions to be found in order to get the CDs to work. In other words, rather than find something better than CD-ROMs, the idea was to find a way simply to make the CDs work.

Less than a decade later the **iPod** would redefine the practice and possibilities of multimedia. A “multimedia package” would never be the same. The continued shift to the “**iPod** Paradigm,” encompassing the likes of the **iPhone** and **iPad**, brought a complete revolution in how media is distributed and consumed. What may be even more shocking than the technology’s present-day ubiquity is the speed with which it was disseminated throughout many parts of the world. The lesson from the CD-ROM, then, is not that the future lies with a better smart phone or e-tablet — the future will actually be seen in the paradigm to follow this one, rather than in the gradual improvements made within the present paradigm.

We probably can’t guess what the next paradigm will be, but I will try anyway. Computing technology has been made portable and powerful, and it will likely get more portable and powerful in the near future without changing our fundamental paradigm. What will change — and change in a revolutionary way — is the cultural production, distribution, and consumption of the content. While mediated by new technologies, the content itself exists apart from it. Content is bound by economic, legal, and cultural regimes embedded so deeply in our society that powerful technology is forced to conform to our expectations (and preconceptions) of how content should behave — and how we should behave with content. What comes next is the necessary rethinking of content in terms of possibility instead of limitation. This is not necessarily a call for open access — OA is already part of the current paradigm and made unachievable only by our collective decision to make it so (for right or wrong). Instead, the next paradigm shift will be away from the question of overcoming access barriers intrinsic to technology. Rather, the next paradigm will encompass new ways of creating and disseminating content. It will be a paradigm of exploring opportunities instead of solving problems. 🌱

Endnotes

1. For a more detailed discussion of paradigm shift as it relates to library acquisitions, see: **Holden, J.** *Acquisitions in the New Information Universe: Core Competencies and Ethical Practices* (**Neal-Shuman**, 2010).
2. **Kuhn, Thomas.** (1996). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. **University of Chicago Press**, p. 10.
3. **Crismond, Linda F.** (1993). “Media Minder.” *ATG* v.5#5, p. 12.

